

ConnectALL & Community Anchor Institutions: Understanding the Broadband Funding Process| Summary Notes

On June 27th, 2023 Empire State Development's ConnectALL Office hosted the second in a series of virtual forums for representatives of Community Anchor Institutions (CAIs) such as libraries, schools, health facilities, and community-based organizations to learn how their organizations can support the ConnectALL planning process and become eligible to receive funding to support internet infrastructure updates, digital skills and device access programs, and more.

This session included an introduction to the ConnectALL Office and an overview of State funding requirements from Tanaya Srini, Senior Director, Digital Equity; an overview of the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program from Jodia Vanel, Federal Program Officer, New York State and Knowledge Build Hudson, Digital Equity Advisor, National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), U.S. Department of Commerce; and an overview of the Capital Project Fund Program from Anna Reed, Senior Broadband Specialist, U.S. Department of the Treasury.

Following the program overviews, attendees were asked to discuss the role CAIs can play in building digital equity. A summary of the information presented, responses and questions raised by session attendees, appears below.

Introduction & Welcome

ConnectALL Office

This forum series happening throughout the summer and fall will engage local and county governments, regional planning and economic development organizations, affordable housing property owners, and labor unions and related organizations. Today's session engaged Community Anchor Institutions.

Introduction to ConnectALL (CAO):

- Governor Hochul's \$1B+ initiative to bring affordable, reliable, high-speed internet to all New Yorkers and close the digital divide. ConnectALL is responsive to community needs as part of a holistic approach.

- Principles guiding CAOs work: equity, performance, choice, affordability, and safety.
- Funding sources: IIJA, ARPA, and NYS FY 2022 Executive Budget; each program has its own timeline and requirements

The ConnectALL Office is tasked with using the input of stakeholders to address the needs of covered populations. The Planning process unlocks the funding for Digital Equity and BEAD. This process is long by design to get it right but majority of the funding is not currently in house.

According to the Broadband, Equity, Access and Deployment Notice of Funding Opportunity page 11, Community Anchor Institutions are entities such as “schools, libraries, health clinics, health centers, hospitals or other medical providers, public safety entities, institutions of higher education, public housing organizations, or community support organizations that facilitate greater use of broadband service by vulnerable populations, including, but not limited to, low-income individuals, unemployed individuals, children, the incarcerated, and aged individuals.”

Upcoming funding opportunities for CAIs include two separate grant programs:

- State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program - 2024
- Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program - 2025

Throughout the planning process and beyond, CAO wants to hear from all stakeholders and community members. As the state digital equity plan is being built, the plan will focus on covered populations (low income, aging populations, incarcerated individuals, veterans, people with disabilities, people with language barriers, rural inhabitants, and racial and ethnic minorities).

Funding Spotlight: BEAD and Digital Equity

NTIA, U.S. Department of Commerce

New York has been allocated \$664 million in BEAD funding, which is not coming right now but has been allotted as of June 26th. In making sure there is affordable, reliable high speed internet every American should have access. Not only is it about deployment, adoption of internet service and digital literacy are also needed. Internet connection is essential to learn, participate in the economy, access telehealth services, connect with friends, and much more. BEAD will focus on internet connections for unserved and underserved locations first, followed by CAIs.

All eligible entities (states, territories and the District of Columbia) including CAO are currently in the planning stages to build out the BEAD Initial Proposal due at the end of August. This plan will set the stage for broadband deployment for the next several years. The BEAD Final Proposal is due one year after the Initial Proposal.

Digital Equity (DE) Act Programs

NTIA, U.S. Department of Commerce

Engaging with ConnectALL will be important as part of the collaborative process. Nationwide, \$60 million has been allocated to help eligible entities develop their Digital Equity (DE) Plan. Another \$1.4 billion will be allocated to implement the plans and build capacity in communities, regions, states and territories to close the digital divide. Both DE and BEAD are focused on covered populations and underrepresented communities

The lack of digital access and literacy can negatively impact the social determinants of health which include: education access, economic stability, social and community context, neighborhood and the built environment, and health care access. To establish a pathway to digital inclusion the following are needed: quality technical support, measures to ensure online privacy and security, access to digital literacy skills and training, internet enabled devices that meet user needs, affordable, robust broadband service, applications and online content.

Capital Projects Fund

U.S. Department of the Treasury

The Capital Projects Fund (CPF) is a \$10 billion program created through the American Rescue Plan. The program supports investment in capital projects that meet the following criteria: investments in capital assets designed to directly enable work, education, and health monitoring; projects designed to address critical needs that resulted from or were made apparent or exacerbated by the COVID-19 public health emergency; and programs designed to address a critical need of the community served.

\$345.5 million has been allocated to New York from CPF. For broadband infrastructure projects to be eligible to receive their state's funds, they must commit to meet or exceed the Treasury's 100/100 Mbps symmetrical speed requirement. Subrecipients are required to participate in the Affordable Connectivity Program.

Opportunities for CAI Engagement

ConnectALL Office

- Summer 2023 engagement opportunities:
 - TODAY: complete post-event survey,
 - engage with regional Digital Equity Coalition to inform the NYS Digital Equity Plan,
 - participate in NYS Digital Equity Task Force town halls, and
 - raise awareness of CAO funding opportunities in your communities
- Fall 2023 engagement opportunities:

[ConnectALL | broadband.ny.gov](https://connectall.org/broadband.ny.gov)

- Participate in State challenge process, check FCC map and show how you are characterized on the map
- Review draft BEAD Initial Proposal and State Digital Equity Plan (will be available in the fall for public comment) and participate in the public comment process
- 2024 engagement opportunities
 - Respond to CAO RFA for DE Capacity Grants
 - Apply to NTIA for funds (DE Competitive Grants)
 - Collaborate with ISPs, Digital Equity orgs, etc. They need you to make their applications robust and viable for funding
 - Continue to engage with CAO

Q&A and Discussion

Participants were asked to discuss the role CAIs can play in building digital equity. Specific questions/comments raised by attendees are below in black font and responses provided by CAO, NTIA or Treasury are in blue.

What role should Community Anchor Institutions play in addressing broadband and digital equity needs in New York?

- I represent a small college in NY based in Queens educating first generation college students and serving immigrant families. We mistakenly assumed many people who had smartphones were proficient with email and internet navigation. When we talk about the role institutions play, colleges are essential intersections. We can reach out to families and communities in a way that other institutions cannot.
 - The data is revealing various assumptions made about young people being digital natives is not true across the board. Access requires skills - a piece of the puzzle.
 - Minority Serving Institutions seeking resources, can connect with NTIA's Office of Minority Broadband Initiatives (OMBI):
Michelle Lemelle
Federal Program Officer
mlemelle@ntia.gov
- Our organization is exploring extending our wifi to the surrounding neighborhood so that folks can have free wifi access - what funding source should we tap into?
 - NTIA guidelines, require that CAO's BEAD allocation of \$664M prioritize first - ensuring broadband infrastructure and service to household and business addresses currently unserved; second - addressing underserved locations; and third - with funds left over after these first two priorities are met, connecting and upgrading CAIs that lack a 1 gigabit per second. CAO's estimates that New York's BEAD allocation will not be sufficient to accomplish the first two priorities. Funding sources for digital inclusion programming include the state's future DE Capacity Grant program and NTIA's DE Competitive Grant program.
- Do you have a list of ISPs that we could collaborate with?

- CAO is willing to strategize with you to connect you with the appropriate ISP in your region to align with your interests.
- For public libraries such as ours here in White Plains, as a CAI I see our role as being one in which we provide not only in-library broadband access, but also as much coverage as possible outside the building. Just as important is to serve in the role of support and education when it comes to broadband access.
- In this process, we have embraced digital literacy and equipment as part of digital equity. I want to emphasize, even with phones, the senior population's increasing access to technology leads to more confidence in using them throughout their life.
 - Device access is one leg of the 3-legged DE stool. With this funding we can also provide digital literacy and tech support for those devices - the second leg and address cybersecurity, the third leg.
- At the public school district level we are intimately involved in the digital literacy process at curriculum level which addresses cybersecurity. We are uniquely positioned to help kids as young as 5. Will there be a collaborative application process?
 - Schools are key partners. Had a successful education meeting last month. CAO welcomes your thoughts on this topic. CAO will invest in the capacity of new partnerships. This information will be forthcoming during the DE Capacity Grant application process.

What resources do CAIs need (connectivity or otherwise) in order to play that role?

- Certified school librarians in every school are needed in order to ensure that information literacy skills are taught to all students.
- Seniors need assistive hardware and software.
 - Digital equity advocates have put this issue on CAO's radar.
- Will there be public WIFI Access Points?
 - BEAD funding is focused on residences. CAO understands the importance of access points.
- Will the grants cover community infrastructure or will they focus mainly on funding reimbursement like the ACP? Or both?
 - The primary focus of BEAD is infrastructure. There is less focus on reimbursement, however accessing ACP will be integral to both the BEAD and DE plans.

Do you have ideas for what the State should prioritize in its planning and program design?

- A formalized forum to begin planning, or make the plan is needed. Bring everyone together to identify priorities in a forum like this one.
 - One 90 minute session is not our only engagement. We ask that you complete the survey at the close of this session as one way to get formalized data inputs. CAO has also collaborated with digital equity advocates and practitioners around the state to conduct 10 regional listening sessions to date and four more are

planned. CAI is also hosting with the NYS Library, town halls on important outcome areas (education, healthcare, workforce development, civic/social engagement, accessing public benefits) that require digital inclusion for goal achievement. Additionally, 30+ focus groups with covered populations have been conducted and a New York State's Internet Access Survey implemented. Please review more opportunities to engage on the CAO website: broadband.ny.gov.

- STEM students and people in the STEM field require a growing number of applications on their devices. Algorithms can project future needs. It is important for future proof issues.
 - The funding is one-time funding. CAO is considering sustainability through structural changes that will go beyond band aid solutions.

Are there other ways that you envision CAIs could plug into the ConnectALL planning process?

- Are programs to educate the community regarding internet/email/application use being actively considered?
 - Yes, this would fall under digital literacy/digital skills acquisition which is likely to be an area of funding for our Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program
- What is the participation rate so far for ACP? We heard data that only 40% of eligible households in some parts of our region were using it. In our focus groups only a small percentage had even heard of it.
 - NYS continues to do outreach to go beyond the 1.3 million households that are enrolled, the result of a multi-agency, multi-pronged outreach effort led by the New York State Department of Public Service and Empire State Development. Nonprofit organizations have also recently received funds from the FCC to do statewide outreach and enrollment in ACP.
- How does the DE timeline relate to BEAD? Our Phase 2 ConnectALL regional [stakeholder engagement and] research was under BEAD per the executed contract, but it seemed to be about DE. So what are the differences between the two projects?
 - NTIA requires a DE Plan be included in the BEAD 5 Year Action Plan that is due at the end of August. After garnering public comment on the DE Plan throughout the fall, CAO will submit the final DE Plan in December to NTIA.
- I would like to know how we are able to help get our families connected that live in rural areas that don't even have adequate cell phone coverage and they have no fiber running by their houses? I work for BOCES and we have many families that are in this situation
 - Under the BEAD program, CAO will review the unserved and underserved locations and leverage these federal dollars as well as State funds to address areas needing connectivity.

Additional Comments

- All types of libraries (school, public, academic) should be called on to help New Yorkers with the SKILLS necessary to use the internet. It's great that we want to give everyone access to the internet. It's essential! But, they need the skills to navigate too.
- I think we are seeing ever increasing needs regarding fiber and aging hardware. Increasing fiber availability and access to funds to replace hardware would be our top concerns.
- As trusted messengers, public libraries play an important role in providing resources, information to the public - including info on ACP, low cost/ access to devices/ and skill training. Our work (the Westchester Library System) with vulnerable communities including formerly incarcerated, seniors, at-risk youth and low literate adults offers a valuable connection to those most in need in our community. What we need is funding to promote the library as a resource for digital skills, digital safety, and literacy in multiple languages and on a variety of platforms.